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ABSTRACT

This review examines studies which deal with family interaction and home situational factors that lead up to and mediate the intrepretation and use of what is viewed on television. It surveys empirical studies in two domains: the effects of parents and siblings on program selection and amount of viewing time; and mediation of what is learned and enacted from programs as a result of parents' discussion and family interaction. To determine similarities and differences across groups, the analysis concentrates on studies which compare low-income or minority families with others. It is concluded that: (1) low-income children view more television than other children; (2) while there seems to be less parental control of children's viewing and less viewing of educational programs in low-income families, discrepancies between parents' and childrens' reporting argues for new kinds of studies; (3) low-income mothers may be good candidates for attempts to help parents mediate the influence of television on their children; and (4) the use of television in Hispanic families may be especially supportive of educational goals. Except for excessive viewing, it was concluded that the quantity of viewing is not likely to handicap school performance for low-income elementary school-age children. Twenty-three references are listed. (HER)

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FAMILY INTERACTION AND TELEVISION VIEWING: STUDIES OF LOW-INCOME AND MINORITY FAMILIES

by

Oliver Moles

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FAMILY INTERACTION AND TELEVISION VIEWING: STUDIES OF LOW-INCOME AND MINORITY FAMILIES

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Television is so much a part of our lives that the facts on its presence and use are commonplace. Almost all U.S. families (98%) own a set; close to half own more than one. Children will spend more time watching television than in school before they reach 18. Almost everything seen will be entertaining rather than intentionally educational programs for the vast majority of viewers.

Many studies have probed what children learn from the diverse messages on television; yet a much smaller number have been concerned with the social context of home viewing. While children learn many things directly from television, the potential contribution of other family members to their learning also is important. Aside from the long term role of parents and others in the process of socialization, another aspect is the family interaction which leads up to and mediates the interpretation and use of what is viewed. These home situational factors are the subject of this paper.

The potential of situational factors is underscored by 1975 Nielsen ratings which show that in prime time 70% of viewing by children is with adults and on weekday afternoons it is 57%. Nielsen noted that co-viewing has not changed much in the period 1971-75 when more families acquired a second set; it is most common among younger children (Robertson, 1979).

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Co-viewing is only one situational factor which in itself does not necessarily imply that family members are interacting or that it is only parents who influence children. The reverse may also be true at times. Other aspects of family life may be more significant for what is learned than co-viewing. This paper will survey empirical studies in two such domains:

1. Effects of parents and siblings on viewing in areas such as program selection and amount of viewing.
2. Mediation of what is learned and enacted from programs as a result of parents' discussion and other forms of family interaction.

In addition, the utility of various methods for studying these areas will be assessed.

The Populations of Interest

There is growing recognition that in order to understand uses and impact of television, studies in the home are essential. Yet methods to conduct ecologically-valid studies are just beginning to be developed.

Questions have also arisen as to differences between low-income and minority families compared to mainstream families in their amount of viewing, whether parents watch with children, how much educational programming is watched, and how parents use television to reinforce their beliefs and values. Some evidence suggests that educational programming may widen the knowledge gap between the poor and better off.(Cook, 1975).

This will be a selective review concentrating on studies which compare low-income or minority families with others. The purpose is to determine similarities and differences across groups in teaching and learning processes in the home surrounding television. Since there is broad interest in working to help

equalize educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups, it is important to have basic information on the ways in which low-income and minority families differ from other families.

There is in fact evidence of sizeable differences among different kinds of families in children's viewing. Lyle and Hoffman (1972) found no differences by socio-ecnomic status or ethnic background (Mexican-Americans) in ownership of a set. However, among both sixth and tenth graders, Mexican-American girls watched more than their Anglo peers; no such clear differences emerged for boys. Tenth grade girls from blue collar families watched more evening shows then their white collar peers, but patterns for boys and both sexes at sixth grade were not consistent.

The evidence is indeed mixed. Lyle (1972) concluded from his review of studies that children from lower socio-economic status families generally view more than those from higher SES families, and black children view more than whites. In another study of children 6-12 only those from families with incomes under $5000 stood out as high frequency viewers after controlling for parents' education, the child's sex, exact age, ethnic background, number of children in the family and other factors (Zill, 1980). In a further distinction, Heyns (1978) has found more children viewing in lower income white families, but no differences among blacks. On balance, the available evidence does point to generally greater viewing among low-income whites but the situation for minority children is mixed and unclear.

Let us now turn to the central questions posed for this investigation. Because the literature on TV and children is by

now very extensive, this paper will draw heavily on excellent recent reviews by Dorr (1978) and by McLeod and his colleagues (1980).

Family Effects on Viewing Decisions

Parents and other family members may influence the choice of programs and the amount of children's viewing time, but the ways they exert influence may vary considerably. The distinctions made by McLeod et al. (1980) between intentional and unintentional motivation of the socializing agent are useful. In their words:

> "Motivation either can be intentional intervention in the form of rules or direct guidance attempts by the agent or unintentional without specific intent acting through the modeling of behavior or the general reward and punishment systems used without regard to television." (pp. 4-5)

Intentional Influence

Intentional intervention has received far the greater attention, especially in studies with different population groups. Several reviews confirm the general conclusion that viewing throughout the last decade by youngsters is little influenced by their parents (Comstock, 1975; Lyle, 1972; McLeod et al., 1980). What restrictions there are decline sharply with the age of the child. A recent study by Mohr (1979) found 85% of both mothers and their 9-14 year old children reporting no guidance about specific Saturday morning programs. Earlier studies report somewhat more parental guidance and control over viewing but the majority of school age children still had viewing freedom (Dorr, 1978).

Some interesting population differences have been reported in what control there is exerted. Greenberg and Dervin (1970) found that low-income and black youths reported less control by parents, and in Bower's (1973) national study college-educated

parents reported more control than parents with a grade school education. A study from 1959 by Blood (1961) reports many upper middle class parents (45%) try to distract children from viewing or reason with them about program choices, whereas other parents characterized as lower lower class never tried to distract their children and were most likely to simply turn off the set. On the other hand, a 1966 study by Martin and Benson (1970) detected no relationship between control of viewing by mothers or fathers and their education or social class. But in the lower class mothers were more likely than fathers to have rules for viewing, whereas in the higher classes no significant differences between parents were found.

Another aspect of intentional control is the kind of programs parents encourage children to watch. Sesame Street was designed to help strengthen the basic skills of disadvantaged children, but in a reanalysis of the evaluation data, Cook et al. (1975) found that more middle class than lower income children were viewing it. Apparently the better off mothers encouraged viewing more often, and viewed with their children moreso. This suggests that educational programs for general distribution can widen the knowledge gap, and indeed educational television does appeal mainly to the better educated segment of the population.

Dorr (1978) cites a series of studies in which parents report more control of viewing than do their children. As an example, a study by Rossiter and Robinson (1975) calls into question our knowledge of viewing control based on parents' reports. Parents claimed less viewing by their children, stricter rules about viewing, more viewing with their children,

more parent-child interaction and less influence of commercials on their children than did the children themselves. Moreover, there was more exaggeration among higher income parents. Thus social desirability could explain the relationship between higher social status and more control of viewing if advantaged parents gave more socially acceptable responses. This possibility is strengthened by Bower's (1973) finding that 80% of all parents and 86% of college-educated parents saw the primary benefit of television for their children as "education".

But all things considered, the relationship between family income and intentional intervention is open to question. More adequate methods of data collection are needed. Self reports should be augmented with information obtained by observing family interaction around TV viewing over a period of time and in other ways getting closer to what actually transpires in families.

Unintentional Influence

Unintentional acts of parents to control television use may be of several kinds. Children may model their parents' behavior, and Dorr (1978) presents evidence from several studies in support of the modeling hypothesis. She concludes that the effect is small, however, and probably decreases as children mature.

McLeod et al. (1980) caution that co-viewing and the common background of children and their parents may account for some of the similarity in viewing preferences. They also note there is some evidence for reverse modeling, or the influence of children on their parents. In a Maryland survey of adolescents, two-thirds said they thought their parents watched sometimes because the teeneagers themselves happened to be watching (Chaffee, McLeod

& Atkin, 1972). But in the area of modeling, there are no population subgroup data to report.

Another form of unintentional influence on use of TV stems from family functioning. Dorr (1978) reports mixed evidence on whether conflict with parents or parental restrictiveness is related to amount of viewing, and concludes that there may be a relationship among younger children but not for adolescents. An interesting early study by Maccoby (1954) reported that middle class preschoolers watched more if parents were restrictive, but there was no relationship among "lower class" families. Maccoby assumed that middle class children can avoid parents by watching television, but with more confined living quarters less economically advantaged children cannot. The presumption seems reasonable, but more recent corroboration would be useful.

Family functioning may include the extent to which TV is a constant background. Families where it is on most of the time when children are present tend to more often have low incomes. (Medrich, 1979).

Siblings

There are virtually no studies on the effects of siblings on viewing, although a 1978 national survey of children 6-17 reported 55-61% of their viewing on the previous day was with brothers and sisters (Bogart, 1978). This was more than with anyone else. Only the 50% viewing with parents in the evening was anywhere near the same level. Nevertheless, it is unclear what role sibs have in influencing each other's choice of programs and information gained from viewing.

The Larger Picture

In all the consideration of family effects, there is no clear indication of factors that may encourage or discourage parents from trying to control children's viewing. Income and minority status clearly affect the opportunities parents have in many ways. But of more immediate interest are the alterable variables in family life which may help parents exercise control. Dorr (1978) suggests a number for consideration which are reproduced here:

> Parents' familiarity with what their children watch and the children's understanding of what they see; parents' sense of the desirability of program messages; parents goals for the development of particular skills and interests in their children; parents' beliefs about the effects of television viewing, and viewing certain kinds of content; parents' ideas about ways to control viewing, and the extent of their success in attempts to control viewing; and parents' beliefs about tangible benefits derived from changing childrens' viewing habits.

A research agenda could well be fashioned out of exploring the relation of such parental attitudes and behaviors to their control efforts, and an agenda for helping parents could be developed from those which are related.

Mediation of Program Messages

Parents and others may not only influence the choice and amount of viewing, but they may also influence what is learned from viewing. This can happen in four distinct ways:

1. By explicitly evaluating or elaborating on the program messages for the benefit of children.
2. By providing children with the information, attitudes and reasoning skills necessary for them to make their own interpretations of program messages.
3. By personal reactions to program messages which do not attempt to influence children and thus serve as role modeling.
4. By structuring the home environment and other settings so as to encourage the performance of certain behaviors derived from the programs.

There is very little known about mediation as role modeling or structuring the environment, and no information that distinguishes the population groups of interest on providing children with skills for program interpretation, so this discussion will be confined to the remaining approach. A good deal of study has gone into understanding the role of evaluating and elaborating program messages, although this must be seen against the small amount of control parents exercise in channeling the choice of TV programs, and the general lack of significant family interaction directed toward television (Greenberg et al., 1972).

The data on different population groups presents a mixed picture. Fathers with lower levels of occupations and education are less likely to say they discuss issues presented on TV with their children than fathers with higher levels, but in this study there were no differences for mothers (Martin & Benson, 1970). The role segregation noted in working class families which leaves many socialization tasks more to the mother could explain these findings.

Some rare information on Hispanic youth is provided by a 1980 study of five southwestern cities which included fifth and tenth grade Hispanic and Anglo youth. Greenberg and his colleagues (1981) found no ethnic differences in student reports on parents' watching TV with them or discussing shows with parents while watching. Almost half of both groups had been told by parents that they watched too much TV. However, the Hispanic parents were more likely to have urged their children to watch certain shows.

In a California statewide survey sixth grade students with limited English showed greater reading proficiency the more

low-income and minority parents and children also.

Summing Up

What then can be concluded from this review. Several kinds of findings stand out clearly.

1. Low-income children do view more television then other children, though the situation for minority children is somewhat ambiguous.
2. While there seems to be less parental control of children's viewing in low-income families, and less viewing of educational programs, discrepancies between parents' and childrens' reporting argue for new kinds of studies. Almost all present studies are correlational which makes causal inferences very difficult. Observational studies are desirable for the detailed information they can provide, and the more subtle hypotheses they can help formulate. An interesting additional method is the use of telephone interviews during prime viewing time. In a methodological study, this technique proved more productive than a range of other methods commonly employed for in-home studies (Corder-Bolz, 1980).
3. While the lack of significant interaction during viewing is heightened among fathers with lower education and occupations, the lack of differences among mothers suggests that low-income mothers may be good candidates for some of the current attempts to help parents mediate the influence of television on their children.
4. Scattered evidence suggests that the use of television in Hispanic families may be especially supportive of educational goals. While most parents see television as educational for

television they watched up to four hours per day (Law, 1980). Presumably most of these students were Hispanic. It may be that Hispanic parents recognize the opportunity for language learning and acculturation in viewing and encourage their children to take advantage of it.

A set of experimental studies have also shown that interpersonal mediation can enhance the prosocial effects of TV. Studying disadvantaged preschoolers, Lesser (1974) noted that children who viewed Sesame Street with their mothers and discussed it together were more likely than others to increase learning of cognitive skills. In a series of experiments, Charles Corder-Bolz (1980) and his colleagues demonstrated that adult interpretation of popular TV shows led elementary school age children to be more critical of the violence in Batman and more accepting of non-traditional sex roles in an episode of All in the Family. McLeod et al. (1980) describe several other studies showing parental mediation effects for explanations of newscasts, advertising and for preschoolers viewing of Mister Rogers.

The consistency of these findings both for educational and entertaining programs gives encouragement to the various efforts to assist parents in interpreting program messages. The networks, religious organizations and local education agencies have all developed training programs to enhance what is broadly termed critical viewing skills. These training programs seek to enhance for parents and children the learning of certain kinds of information from TV shows. Evaluating this training scarcely exists as yet. Whether it is successful in getting parents to continue to mediate program messages remains to be seen. The Lesser study supports the idea that such training would be of value to

children, Hispanics may see a further advantage in television of aiding their children's English language acquisition.

At a more general level, the absence of data for the population groups of interest on many points leads to two further conclusions.

1. Since children spend much viewing time with their siblings, their influence on each other deserves more attention. A related point is the need to recognize and construct studies that will allow for reciprocal influences between sibs and between parents and children.
2. Until low-income and minority families are given more attention, we will learn little about the interpersonal dynamics of their viewing patterns.

A Wider Perspective

A common concern of educators and parents alike is the relationship of television viewing on children's school achievement. Here is some recent evidence.

A statewide survey by the California State Department of Education at several grade levels shows reading, writing and math achievement declining with more hours spent watching television (Law, 1980). The relationship was stronger for 12th than 6th graders. But for 6th grade children of unskilled workers there was no decline in any of the skill areas except for those watching more than four hours per day. This coincides with Heyns' (1978) conclusion from her study of elementary school children in Atlanta that the amount of summer television watching has a "consistently detrimental but rather trivial impact on learning." Zill's (1980) analysis of national survey data on children 7-11 years old shows similar weak effects of amount of viewing. Parent education, ethnic status and family income were much stronger predictors.

On the other hand, for 12th graders in California there was a rather strong and consistent relationship between more viewing and poorer performance on basic skills (Law, 1980). For older students viewing may directly conflict with doing homework whereas for younger children less homework is likely to be assigned. So sheer quantity of viewing, except for very heavy doses, is not likely to handicap school performance for low-income elementary school age children. This does not say anything about the effects of different kinds of programs, but it does introduce a caution against blanket indictments of television viewing and indiscriminate attempts to restrict viewing.

Turning again to the mediation question, the practical effect of efforts to limit general viewing may not bolster student achievement, except when viewing interferes with homework or is so heavy that other normal activities are sacrificed. Parent education, income and minority status themselves were much stronger predictors of vocabulary scores in Zill's (1980) multivariate analysis than amount of viewing.

A much more promising avenue for change is the mediation of television content. The many programs and techniques being developed and offered hold some promise of helping families use television creatively to further their own educational goals. Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether low-income and minority families will be able to take advantage of these developments because of the press of their life circumstances. Delineating how their environments impact on family interaction around television viewing is a necessary first step. Only then will the potential of approaches to encourage the mediation of television content be put into context.

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